



Per Bilde, *The Originality of Jesus: A Critical Discussion and a Comparative Attempt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 2013.

Bilde's volume strives mightily to trace the history of the study of the Historical Jesus from its roots in the Enlightenment through Strauss and Schweitzer to the present. And then he endeavors to compare the figure of Jesus with other Jewish and non Jewish eschatological preachers in order to uncover exactly what it is about Jesus that's different.

Chapter One introduces the study. Chapter two offers a survey of critical scholarship from Reimarus to 2012. Chapter three is an examination of previous attempts to discern the originality of the Historical Jesus. Chapter four is Bilde's attempt to reconstruct the life of Jesus. It is in chapter five that Bilde arrives at the heart of the matter and offers a comparison between Jesus and the following persons:

The Hasmonean Prince Simon, The Teacher of Righteousness, Hillel, Judas the Galilean, John the Baptist, Jesus Barabbas, Theudas, Paul, The Egyptian Prophet, Jesus son of Ananiah, Josephus, Jochanan ben Zakai, Akiba, Bar Kochba, Jehudah ha Nasi, Sabbatai Zvi, and Menachem mendel Schneersohn.

He also compares Jesus to various later related Christian figures and even to secular prophets of modern times.

The book ends with Bilde's conclusions and a helpful bibliography.

The basic question of the study is: how did Jesus differ from Judaism in the several centuries surrounding the first? How unique was he, if he was at all, and what are those differences? Bilde sees himself in the line of Reimarus and Strauss and other such souls, asking the hard questions and uncovering the true facts. He even insists that no study of this kind and to

this extent has ever been accomplished. Jesus may or may not turn out to be unique, but Bilde wants his readers to know that his work is.

... my readers might think that the question of Jesus' originality must already have been analysed thoroughly, and that it must have been completely exhausted by earlier research. To my own surprise, however, a detailed review of the literature on this subject (ch. 3) has shown that this is far from being the case, whatever the cause may be (p. 19).

Bilde's work is, indeed, unique but the nagging question which haunted my passage through every page was this: what good does it do to compare Jesus to persons who lived earlier or later than he did? Isn't that, at the end of the day, apples and oranges? This question Bilde doesn't answer to my personal satisfaction.

To be sure, there is a lot to be learned from comparing Jesus to John the Baptist. They are, after all, contemporaries- sharing the same world and the same worldview. And even comparing him to the Teacher of Righteousness makes almost a little sense. But what do we know about the Teacher? Even less, I dare say, than we know about Jesus.

However when it comes to comparing Jesus to Josephus or Akiba or Sabbatai Zvi, it simply isn't clear that such comparisons are meaningful. Bilde could, following his logic, also compare Jesus to Harold Camping – but what would that teach us about Jesus? The same, it seems to me, as comparing Jesus to Zvi.

Schweitzer long ago taught us the terribly hard lesson that most Jesus interpreters look down the well into his life and end up seeing only their own reflection. And then Schweitzer does the same thing! He was looking for an eschatological preacher and that's what he found. Bilde, similarly, went hunting for a Jesus that was so very much like every other apocalyptic/eschatological teacher that, unsurprisingly, that is just what he found.

On page 26 Bilde tells us what he will find:

In my view it is historically unthinkable, and thus historically implausible, that the historical Jesus should have been a completely original innovator who in all respects differed from his contemporaries...[and] it is just as historically implausible that he should have been a totally integrated Palestinian Jew who did not differ at all from his contemporaries (p. 26-27).

Jesus was different, but the same. He was the same, but different.

Bultmann was, and remains, correct. We can know nothing of the Historical Jesus without seeing him through the lens of theology.

Yet in spite of that, this is a wonderful book and wonderfully informative. If readers want to trace the 'Reception History' of Jesus of Nazareth, I can't think of another book which tells the story quite this way or quite so well. There are a few mistakes along the way (like when Bilde calls James Charlesworth by the name of Charles Charlesworth – which I confess I found a tad amusing) but there are also flashes of 'evil genius'. The highlight of this category is chapter 2.4– which Bilde calls 'Recent unhistorical interpretations of Jesus and contemporary popular literature and films about Jesus' (pp. 68 ff).

... it is, however, no secret that in our time, besides the scholarly investigations of the historical Jesus, an immense quantity of unscholarly Jesus-interpretations, popular literature and movies, and a lot of fantastic literature about Jesus are continuously being published (p. 68).

Who has written some of these 'recent unhistorical interpretations of Jesus'? Robert Eisenmann, Barbara Thiering, J. Landrum Kelly, Andries van Aarde, Leonard Swidler, Ben Witherington, F. Scott Spencer, and Michael Baigent among others.

These and many others get Jesus wrong. Those who get him right, in Bilde's view, are those like Sanders and Vermes because they returned...

... to Reimarus' Straus', Weiss' and Schweitzer's positions (p. 85).

Readers know whom Bilde prefers to learn his history from and those whom he disdains. And that's a good thing because at least there remains no question concerning where he stands.

Overall, this book's value lies in its method and thoroughness. It may miss out in its conclusions, but it can't be faulted for its attempt. It deserves to be read by everyone interested in the life of Jesus and the study of that life.

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